

HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Forgetting

Faith T. Fitzgerald, MD

UC Davis School of Medicine, Sacramento, CA, USA.

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My mother, as she approached her 86th year, had a progressive memory loss. Her recent memory was vivid: an upcoming dental appointment generated multiple admonitions to me not to forget to take her there on the precise date and time. It was her distant memories that were lacunar...fragments in chaos, a crumbling mosaic picture of her past. It surprised me that I should feel the loss of the missing bits as a bereavement of my childhood memories, because many weren't really ever my memories at all, but rather hers—stories I'd heard from her of a time before I was. As I was growing up, she'd tell me tales of her exotic life as a girl and young woman in Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s. My grandfather, her father, had been a captain in the Russian Imperial Guard who had, fortunately, been assigned to duty in China before the Bolshevik revolution. With the loss of Tsar and country, he stayed and made a life there. The family was well off, and she was the pampered child of a privileged house. She painted for me, in words, colorful scenes of the international settlements of storied old Shanghai: the multiple different European nationals, the rickshaw rides and the Chinese servants, the frequent visits of wealthy and world famous 'notable personages,' the yearly military tattoos of the British regiment in honor of the king's birthday, the lavish balls at the French club, and the evening strolls along the great riverside boulevard called The Bund with her many beaux, handsome young naval officers who had come from every country to this exciting port. They had all lived well beyond their time in her memories. But in her extreme age, as she diminished, these too were dying, the romantic figures, places, and events disappearing from her mind, one by one.

But always and ever, there was Carrington. She would not let him fade away. He and she stood side by side, his arm around her slender waist, in the old photo in the silver frame above her bed. I had heard about Carrington since I was old enough to listen. He was a tall American from North Carolina, a graduate of Duke, come to China to work for the British-American Tobacco Company. He and she had fallen in love and were engaged to be married. Then came the Chinese Civil War, and bombs fell in Shanghai. Many of the Europeans, including my mother, evacuated to safer places. Separated by the troubled times, Mom and Carrington had never found one another again. She had heard through mutual friends that he had contracted tuberculosis and returned to the States. She herself came to America alone in the late 1930s, and here met and married my father. She had never seen her first love again. But she could

not forget him. She still kept his Duke University ring, with which he'd pledged his troth, in an old embroidered cloth-covered Chinese memento box.

One spring, my mother and I were sitting, she in her wheelchair, in our garden. The warming air was redolent with the fragrance of gardenias.

"I wonder," she said to me, "whatever happened to Carrington."

"What brings that up?" I asked.

"Gardenias," she said. "The last time I danced with Carrington was at the Gardenia Hotel in Tsing-tao."

"Well, he was 13 years older than you, and you're 85. Chances are he's dead." It sounded cruel even as I said it, and I was instantly sorry.

"I was just wondering," she said, "did I ever tell you about Carrington?"

"Hundreds of times."

"He was the great love of my life."

"I know."

"We were engaged."

"Yes."

"He was very handsome."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen his picture."

"I wonder what ever happened to him."

It occurred to me then that something might be done. I knew an intern, Dr. Sasslo, who was a computer whiz. I had watched him one night as he had traced the family history of one of his ward patients, who was the niece of a famous American, on the nursing station computer. He found the data not only on the famous person who was his patient's aunt, but also much else about the lives of the whole family, and the patient herself. It was all there on the Web, he told me, if one knew how to look.

"Mom," I asked her in the garden, "shall I try to find Carrington?"

"How could you do that?" I told her about Sasslo. Her eyes lit up. "Really? Can you do that?"

"Really...well, maybe...I'll ask Sasslo. But we know Carrington's full name, his birthday, home town, university and graduation year, and the company he worked for. That may be all we need. Shall I talk to Sasslo? Shall I try?"

"Yes. Try."

I called Sasslo and told him the story. "I know you're busy," I said, "but it's very important to her." He was good natured, but as pessimistic as I had been.

"Don't you think he's dead?" he asked.

"Probably."

"He'll be easier to find if he's dead," Sasslo said.

Every day for the next two weeks my mother asked me if 'Professor' Sasslo had discovered anything. I told her I hadn't heard from him, but I knew he'd do it when he could. During those same weeks, I discovered that she had forgotten the name of her husband, my father, though she remembered the name of Carrington's boss in China from nearly two thirds of a century ago; she wondered whether having that name would help Professor Sasslo. I told her I doubted it.

Then Sasslo called me at my office to ask if I knew any Duke alumni.

"What?" I asked.

"Here's the story," he said. "Your guy is on the Duke alumni list, and is evidently still alive—at least they don't know he's dead if he is. But

they won't give me much because I'm not a Duke alumnus. The website says that if you want to find him and are a Duke alumnus, you can write to them and they'll forward the letter to him—but they won't give out his address. So if you want it, a Duke alumnus will have to request it for you."

"I know plenty of Duke alumni," I said. "Do you really think it's our man?"

"Seems like it—same first, middle, last name; same birth date and graduation date as your Carrington. That's all I could discover...except for the fact that he got a BS degree, and what his wife's maiden name was."

"Great," I said. "I'll let Mom know."

Carrington alive! I, who'd never met him, was thrilled. I thought how Mom would react. I envisioned arranging a reunion, the two old people meeting again in some soft southern place, the undying love of youth resurgent as memories overwhelmed them both and trembling hands touched after 65 years separated. My eyes misted.

She was at dinner when I came home from work, but immediately put down her fork: "Did you hear from Professor Sasslo?" she asked.

"I did...and it's good news. Carrington may be alive."

She took in a single swift breath. "Where is he?"

"That we don't quite know." I told her what Sasslo had said. "We can write him in care of the alumni association, which will forward your letter to him. I can ask one of my friends—a Duke alumnus—to help us."

"Tell me everything the professor found out," she said. I read her my notes of what Sasslo had said. When I got to his wife's maiden name, she reacted sharply.

"His wife's name?" she said. "He's got a wife?"

"Yes."

"What's his wife's name again?"

I told her.

"Never heard of her," she said. "Who is she?"

"How should I know? Besides, she may or may not be alive." I was caught up in the glow of my imagined witness of the romantic reunion I would arrange between the two old people. "I'll be happy to try to write to Carrington and tell him you're..."

My mother snapped her head back. "He's married," she said. "Never mind."

I was stunned. Never mind? *Never mind!* But this is Carrington! Don't you want to contact him, or to find out whether he..." She didn't let me finish.

"He married," she said.

"You expected him to be celibate? To wait for you for 65 years? He never knew what happened to you. You might have died in the war for all he knew..." I was incredulous.

"He could have looked for me. We found him, after all."

"We knew his university...you went to school in China. We knew his last name...you changed

yours when you married dad. You've moved all over the country since you came to America. He could never have found you."

"How do we know he tried?"

"But you got married. Why shouldn't he?" I asked.

"That was different."

"Mom...he was your first, your greatest love...!"

"He's married," she said. "I don't want to be a home wrecker!"

"But, Mom...!"

"Forget him." And she went back to eating her supper.

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Corresponding Author: Faith T. Fitzgerald, MD; UC Davis School of Medicine, 4150 V Street, Suite 2400, Sacramento, CA 95817, USA (e-mail: Faith.fitzgerald@ucdmc.ucdavis.edu).